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ABSTRACT

This series of statements offers a synthesis of the body of currently available knowledge about adult learning in the areas of motivation to learn, curriculum design, and the classroom environment. The section on motivation focuses on the role of life-event changes in encouraging adults to seek out learning experiences, adults' motivation to pursue knowledge and skills they can use, and strong motivations to increase or maintain a sense of self-esteem and pleasure. The set of statements concerned with curriculum design highlights adults' preference for single-concept/theory courses over survey courses; the ways adults deal with new ideas in conflict with their belief and value systems; adults' preference for self-directed and self-designed learning projects, multimedia learning experiences, and self-paced instruction; adults' need for how-to and application-oriented information; and positive responses to face-to-face, one-to-one access to an expert. The final section offers information on creating a classroom environment conducive to adult learning by, for example, attending to students' physical and psychological comfort; clarifying and articulating the expectations of both the students and the instructor; promoting dialogue among peers; drawing students out to share their experiences; and balancing the presentation of new material, debate, and discussion, and the sharing of student experiences and time constraints. (LAL)

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## 30 THINGS WE KNOW FOR SURE ABOUT ADULT LEARNING


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## 30 THINGS WE KNOW FOR SURE ABOUT ADULT LEARNING

A variety of sources provides us with a body of fairly reliable knowledge about adult learning. This knowledge might be divided into three basic divisions: things we know about adult learners and their motivation, things we know about designing curriculum for adults, things we know about working with adults in the classroom.

### Motivation to Learn

1. Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-change events--e.g., marriage, divorce, a new job, a promotion, being fired, retiring, losing a loved one, moving to a new city.
2. The more life change events an adult encounters, the more likely he or she is to seek out learning opportunities. Just as stress increases as life-change events accumulate, the motivation to cope with change through engagement in a learning experience increases.
3. The learning experiences adults seek out on their own are directly related--at least in their perception--to the life-change events that triggered the seeking.
4. Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after, or even during the actual life-change event. Once convinced that the change is a certainty, adults will engage in any learning that promises to help them cope with the transition.
5. Adults who are motivated to seek out a learning experience do so primarily because they have a use for the knowledge or skill being sought. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
6. Increasing or maintaining one's sense of self-esteem and pleasure are strong secondary motivators for engaging in learning experiences.

### Curriculum Design

7. Adult learners tend to be less interested in, and enthralled by, survey courses. They tend to prefer single-concept, single-theory courses that focus heavily on the application of the concept to relevant problems. This tendency increases with age.
8. Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep--and use--the new information.
9. Information that conflicts sharply with what is already held to be true, and thus forces a re-evaluation of the old material, is integrated more slowly.
10. Information that has little "conceptual overlap" with what is already known is acquired slowly.
11. Fast-paced, complex or unusual learning tasks interfere with the learning of the concepts or data they are intended to teach or illustrate.
12. Adults tend to compensate for being slower in some psychomotor learning tasks by being more accurate and making fewer trial-and-error ventures.
13. Adults tend to take errors personally and are more likely to let them affect self-esteem. Therefore, they tend to apply tried-and-true solutions and take fewer risks.
14. The curriculum designer must know whether the concepts or ideas will be in concert or in conflict with the learner. Some instruction must be designed to effect a change in belief and value systems.
15. Programs need to be designed to accept viewpoints from people in different life stages and with different value "sets."
16. A concept needs to be "anchored" or explained from more than one value set and appeal to more than one developmental life stage.



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17. Adults prefer self-directed and self-designed learning projects over group-learning experiences led by a professional, they select more than one medium for learning, and they desire to control pace and start/stop time.
18. Nonhuman media such as books, programmed insruction and television have become popular with adults in recent years.
19. Regardless of media, straightforward how-to is the preferred content orientation. Adults cite a need for application and how-to information as the primary motivation for beginning a learning project.
20. Self-direction does *not* mean isolation. Studies of self-directed learning indicate that self-directed projects involve an average of 10 other people as resources, guides, encouragers and the like. But even for the self-professed, self-directed learner, lectures and short seminars get positive ratings, especially when these events give the learner face-to-face, one-to-one access to an expert.

**In the Classroom**

21. The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable, long lectures, periods of interminable sitting and the absence of practice opportunities rate high on the irritation scale.
22. Adults have something real to lose in a classroom situation. Self-esteem and ego are on the line when they are asked to risk trying a new behavior in front of peers and cohorts. Bad experiences in traditional education, feelings about authority and the preoccupation with events outside the classroom affect in-class experience.
23. Adults have expectations, and it is critical to take time early on to clarify and articulate *all* expectations before getting into content. The instructor can assume responsibility only for his or her own expectations, not for those of students.
24. Adults bring a great deal of life experience into the classroom, an invaluable asset to be acknowledged, tapped and used. Adults can learn well--and much--from dialogue with respected peers.
25. Instructors who have a tendency to hold forth rather than facilitate can hold that tendency in check--or compensate for it--by concentrating on the use of open-ended questions to draw out relevant student knowledge and experience.
26. New knowledge has to be integrated with previous knowledge; students must actively participate in the learning experience. The learner is dependent on the instructor for confirming feedback on skill practice; the instructor is dependent on the learner for feedback about curriculum and in-class performance.
27. The key to the instructor role is control. The instructor must balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of relevant student experiences, and the clock. Ironically, it seems that instructors are best able to establish control when they risk giving it up. When they shelve egos and stifle the tendency to be threatened by challenge to plans and methods, they gain the kind of facilitative control needed to effect adult learning.
28. The instructor has to protect minority opinion, keep disagreements civil and unheated, make connections between various opinions and ideas, and keep reminding the group of the variety of potential solutions to the problem. The instructor is less advocate than orchestrator.
29. Integration of new knowledge and skill requires transition time and focused effort on application.
30. Learning and teaching theories function better as resources than as a Rosetta stone. A skill-training task can draw much from the behavioral approach, for example, while personal growth-centered subjects seem to draw gainfully from humanistic concepts. An eclectic, rather than a single theory-based approach to developing strategies and procedures, is recommended for matching instruction to learning tasks.

The next five years will eclipse the last fifty in terms of hard data production on adult learning. For the present, we must recognize that adults want their learning to be problem-oriented, personalized and accepting of their need for self-direction and personal responsibility.

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